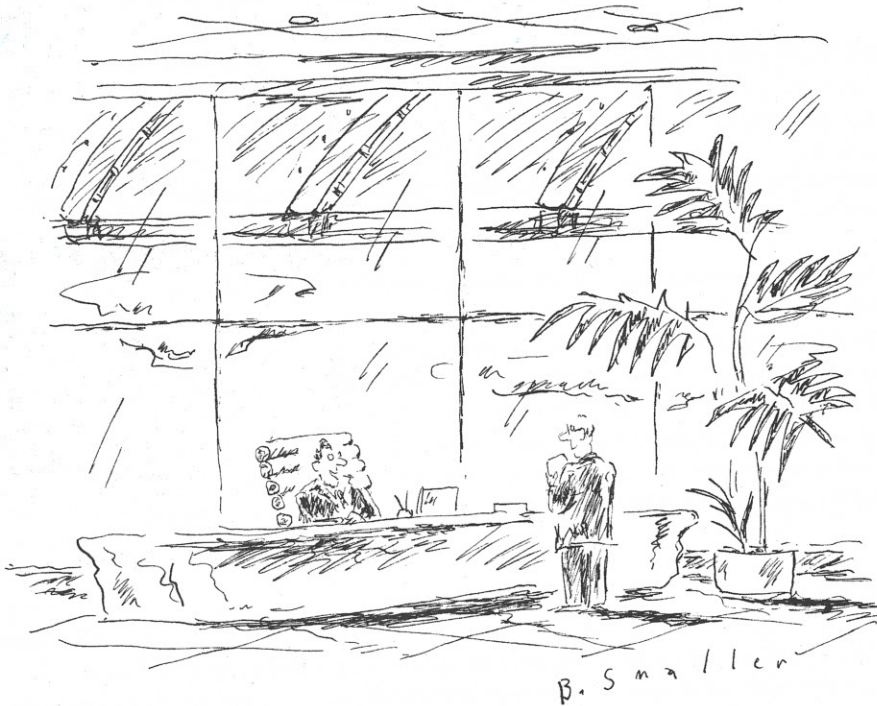


# Advertising: Selling the Product



*"In the marketplace of ideas, we may not have the best ideas, but we have the best marketing."*

Barbara Smaller The New Yorker Collection/The Cartoon Bank

*The ads of our times are the richest and most faithful daily reflection that any society ever made of its entire range of activities.* —MARSHALL McLUHAN

*Advertising is legalized lying.* —H. G. WELLS

*Doing business without advertising is like winking at a girl in the dark. You know what you are doing, but nobody else does.* —STUART HENDERSON BRITT

*Would you persuade, speak of interest, not reason.* —BEN FRANKLIN

*Advertising persuades people to buy things that they don't need with money they ain't got.* —WILL ROGERS

*Advertising is what you do when you can't go see somebody. That's all it is.* —FAIRFAX CONE (AD EXECUTIVE)

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Advertising is so obviously useful that it's surprising it has such a bad name. Ads tell us what is new and what is available, where, when, and for how much. They tell us about a product's (alleged) quality and specifications. All for free, except for the effort of reading or paying attention.

Yet there are legitimate gripes about advertising. Ads don't tell us about product defects. They often mislead, either via exaggeration or, occasionally, downright lies. And because some products are advertised more heavily or more effectively than others, ads tend to skew our choices in unreasonable ways.

It also has been argued that advertising increases the costs of goods to consumers. It isn't uncommon for a quarter, or even a third, of the price of an item to be due to advertising costs, and critics have argued that this constitutes a tremendous waste.

But this charge is misleading. Advertising does cost a great deal of money, and this expense has to be factored into the costs of finished goods. Nevertheless, advertising greatly reduces the prices of those goods in the marketplace compared to what they would cost were advertising abolished or greatly



restricted. It does so because it lowers production costs by making mass production profitable, thus enabling producers to obtain a mass market. In short, advertisers advertise because it reduces the costs of *selling goods*. It is not an accident that virtually all businesses advertise; they do so because they don't know of a better or cheaper way to sell their products. Those who argue otherwise generally forget that if a company doesn't advertise, it will have to increase other selling costs, especially sales commissions. (Advertising also has been objected to on the grounds that it gives an unfair advantage to large organizations when they compete against smaller ones, but objections of this kind raise issues best left unexplored here—for example, about the desirability of large versus small businesses.)

It is worth noting, though, that advertising techniques and markets have changed dramatically over the past forty years. In 1965, companies poured most of their advertising dollars into the three major TV networks: ABC, NBC, and CBS, the market that reached 80 percent of the prime target audience—the 18- to 49-year-olds. Today, most Americans have more than a hundred channels to choose from and the high-tech tools to mute or bypass ads altogether. Since fewer people read newspapers and magazines (once major marketing outlets) and more turn to the Internet for information and entertainment, the advertising industry has had to reach far broader and much more complex markets than ever before. But advertisers are nothing if not inventive. So over the years, ad agencies have metamorphosed into marketing companies that hawk their products through public relations promotions, in-store displays, and direct mail gimmicks. They use product placement, show ads in movie theaters, and inundate the Internet with pop-up ads and TV commercials that stream on (and on and on) to websites like YouTube and Facebook, giving them an eternal shelf life. And the lines between marketing, advertising, and public relations are further blurred as companies scramble to take advantage of the massive echo of social media and the ever-elusive viral video. But no matter how glitzy or numerous the innovations are, the bottom line is that they still manipulate consumer attitudes about beauty, status, relationships, and sex, using age-old gimmicks to sell us the goods.

## 1. Are Advertisements Arguments? Examples of Rhetoric?

We do not generally think of advertisements, be they on TV, in website banner ads, in newspapers, or in subway cars, as being *arguments*. In fact, it may not be clear that advertisements are really meant to be persuasive in the sense that, say an opinion piece in a newspaper is. Why, then, give them a whole chapter in a book about logic and rhetoric?

The answer is a little complicated, and has more to do with how we treat advertising than with its purpose.

There are at least two senses of “persuade.” In one sense, we persuade someone when we cause a certain *action*, as when we say things like “I was persuaded to eat by the dinner he put in front of me.” Persuasion to action does not require rationality or reasons. We even talk about “persuading” animals to do certain things. In the other sense, we persuade when we change someone’s *beliefs*, as in “I persuaded the class that the test was unfairly constructed.” This is the sense of persuasion with which we’re concerned in a study of public rhetoric. We employ arguments to persuade people of certain conclusions on the basis of premises.

So in which sense are advertisements meant to persuade us? Are they meant to get us to do certain things or to believe certain things? Fundamentally, we have to say that advertisements are meant to have us do certain things, usually to spend money on particular products or services. If an advertisement causes us to buy a particular product, does the advertiser really care *how* that happened? Does it *really* matter to them if we come to believe in the value of what they’re offering? Or is the important thing just that we buy it?

This does not mean that we (the consumers) should treat advertisements as agents of persuasion only in the first sense. We have an interest in being persuaded to the kinds of actions advertisers want us to take only on the basis of beliefs. In fact, we have an interest in being persuaded to this sort of action only on the basis of *rational* beliefs. We therefore have an interest in *treating* advertising as though it were attempting to persuade us to belief on the basis of argument. When we do so, we become better consumers.

But if advertisements are arguments (or if we are to treat them that way), then what kind of arguments are they? They certainly do not have clearly laid-out premises and conclusions. But many arguments, as we’ve discussed, have unstated conclusions. Advertisements are plausibly arguments that almost always have the unstated conclusion: “You should buy this product or service.” When we think of advertisements this way, many of them start to look ridiculous. Paraphrasing Gillette: “You should buy our brand of shaving razor because . . . jet fighters and explosions!” Paraphrasing Axe Body Spray: “You should buy our product because women, who have all of the sophistication and discernment of wild deer, will become uncontrollably attracted to you if you do.” Paraphrasing innumerable ads for clothes, airlines, yogurt, apartment buildings, phones, you name it: “You should buy our product because you’ll have something in common with a person who represents to you what you would like to be.”

Now to be fair, a lot of advertising is not really meant to convince you to buy a product or service so much as it is to make sure you *remember* the product or service. But then, of course, we should ask ourselves: should we spend our money on something just because we happen to remember its name?

## 2. Promise and Identification Advertisements

Virtually all ads are one or another (or both) of two basic kinds. **Promise advertisements** promise to satisfy desires or allay fears. All you have to do is buy the product advertised (remove bad body odor by using Old Spice deodorant; enjoy life more by driving a Ford



Explorer). Most promise ads provide “reasons why” the product will do the job or do it better than competitors (Kleenex tissues are softer; a bowl of Total cereal has more vitamins and minerals). Then there are ads that promise to satisfy our bodily needs, like the taglines for Snickers candy bars, “When You’re Hungry, Reach for a Snickers” or “Hungry, Why Wait?” The implication is that Snickers is a food that will satisfy hunger when, in fact, the only food value is in a few peanuts—the rest is sugar, chocolate, nougat, and caramel, none of which will ward off hunger for long. But this immensely successful campaign boosted sales 3½ percent, no small amount for the best-selling candy bar in the world. This campaign was so successful, in fact, that Snickers has built most of its subsequent marketing around the idea that Snickers is a great cure for hunger. A later campaign revolved around the tagline “You’re Not You When You’re Hungry.” These sometimes-clever ads basically suggested that hunger causes undesirable personality changes and that Snickers can help solve that. Of course, putting 27 grams of sugar (about nine sugar packets) into an empty stomach may not have the advertised effect of getting us on a more even keel.

*Promise, large promise, is the soul of advertising.*

—SAMUEL JOHNSON

**Identification advertisements** sell the product by getting us to identify with the product. They are a kind of promise ad, since they promise that somehow or other you will be better off using the product. But the promise is made indirectly through identification with respected institutions or individuals (or occasionally simply by fostering identification with the product directly). We all tend to identify with our own group and with those whom we respect—people who are famous, rich, accomplished, unusually brave, or powerful. Identification ads take advantage of this very human trait. Recall our discussion of celebrity endorsement ads back in Chapter 3. As irrational as it may be to take Taylor Swift or Beyoncé to be soft-drink authorities, these ads do work on us. And this is precisely because we identify with the famous people they feature and thus with the products they tout; we become like them in some small way by using the same products they do.

Identification ads—indeed, all ads—work for another interesting reason. When people shop, say, in a supermarket, they tend to purchase products whose brand names are familiar to them. Few of us, for example, will buy a brand of toothpaste we have never heard of or never seen advertised; we buy a brand we recognize even though we know no other “reason why” we should buy that brand and not a competing one. (When was the last time you chose a brand with which you were not familiar through advertisements over one you knew well?)

### 3. Things to Watch Out for in Advertisements

The good news about advertising, you will recall, is that it often provides true and useful information about products and entertains us with humor, storytelling, or just nice scenes or sentiments. Time enjoyably spent is time not completely wasted. *Recent*

*Examples:* Android’s adorable “Peaceful Co-existence” TV spots that feature (at least apparent) friendships between unlikely pairs of animals; Geico’s “Unskippable Family” ad that plays with our newfound ability to skip ads; and (a slightly older ad, but a personal favorite that you should definitely look up) Ikea’s “Lamp” ad from 2002.

The bad news about advertising stems from the increasing ability of advertising geniuses—and some of them, alas, *are* geniuses—to manipulate audiences via sophisticated psychological ploys. Everyone realizes how others are conned by advertising, but most of us think that we somehow are exceptions. Young people, including college students, often deny that they are influenced by advertising. They typically say that they don’t wear designer jeans or Adidas shoes because of advertising, but rather that they just “like” these products, self-deceptively ignoring the effect of advertising on their preferences. In fact, *no one* is immune to the influence of advertisements. (A Madison Avenue bigwig owned up to this when he said, “Even I fall for the stuff.”) So we all are faced with the problem of how best to use advertising without being used. One way is to become familiar with the advertising devices and gimmicks used to appeal to our weaknesses, prejudices, and emotions unguided by intelligence. No doubt we’ll still get taken now and then, but perhaps less often and with less seriously harmful consequences.

### ADS INVITE US TO REASON FALLACIOUSLY

We’ve already noted that ads often feature celebrity endorsements to manipulate us into buying the product. They thus invite us to commit the fallacy appeal to authority. We don’t stop to think whether Taylor Swift really does prefer Coca-Cola to Pepsi, or whether she just gets paid to say she does. Anyway, what difference would it make to you if she didn’t drink soft drinks at all? (*Consumer Reports* taste tests, by the way, show that hardly anyone can distinguish between Pepsi and Coke. Can Taylor Swift? Can you? *Hint:* In several actual classroom tests conducted by one of the authors of this text over a period of years, students consistently failed to distinguish their favorite brands of beer from competing brands.)

In the case of Taylor Swift advertising Coke, it seems obvious that she is no authority on the taste of soft drinks, which, anyway, certainly are a matter of individual preference. But some celebrity ads are different, sports equipment endorsements being a case in point. Before the sex scandal shattered the image of Tiger Woods, he dominated the golf scene and was thought to be one of the greatest golfers of all time. So his endorsement of Nike’s Tour Accuracy golf balls carried great weight with golf duffers intent on improving their scores. But in fact, Woods doesn’t use these ordinary golf balls in tournaments. Instead, he hits custom-made balls not available to the general public (as do, by the way, some other pro golfers who endorse other brands).

After the scandal erupted, Woods’s advertising appeal evaporated, confirming multiple studies showing that most successful celebrity endorsements depend on a tight fit between the celebrity and the product. In Woods’s case, the fit was intensified. Not only was he an iconic golfer, he was the embodiment of ideal virtues. A genius at the game, he appeared to be hard working, dedicated, disciplined, and tough-minded—an ethical, reliable man. In other words, his virtues as well as his prowess persuaded consumers to buy the sports products he endorsed. And that, of course, is the best sell of all. Consumers are inclined to trust a virtuous celebrity—even though he isn’t virtuous and doesn’t use the product he is hawking. So for a while no one has used the slogan “Go on. Be a Tiger.”



It should be clear by now that ads generally are designed to invite us to overlook their *suppression of evidence*. They tell us the good features of products but always hide their product's warts. (Why should they do otherwise?) Cigarette ads contain probably the most obvious examples of this fallacy, given what we know about the lethal effects of smoking. When R. J. Reynolds Tobacco launched a feminine version of Camels called Camel No. 9, you can be sure the ads made no mention of the fact that far more women die of lung cancer today than breast cancer. Instead, they played up the feminine appeal of the cigarette, giving it a name that evokes images of perfumes like Chanel No. 19 and packaging it in pink and green floral boxes labeled "light and luscious." Getting women to identify with a brand that has long played to male smokers has put Camels in competition with its biggest competitor for the female market, Virginia Slims, whose classic slogan, "You've Come a Long Way, Baby," ironically reflected the fact that women, indeed, have come a long way—in catching up with male mortality rates for lung cancer.

*There is an art to making whole lies out of half truths.*

—CHRISTY MATHEWSON (BASEBALL HALL OF FAME PITCHER  
WHO WAS PAID TO ENDORSE TUXEDO PIPE TOBACCO)

Advertisements are also common homes for fallacious appeals to popularity and tradition—and sometimes both, as when Ford on their website touts the value of their F-Series truck by claiming that it has been the best-selling truck in America for 35 years. But these are just some of the fallacies that are especially common in advertising. You can find just about any of the fallacies we discussed earlier in one ad or another.

Some ads, though, use fallacious reasoning humorously and aren't meant to be taken seriously. A good example is this BMW ad: "Doctors say increased activity slows the aging process. Coincidentally, BMW drivers are ten years younger than other luxury car drivers." This humorous use of cause and effect was not an example of *questionable cause* because it was not intended to be taken literally. Nor was this clever blurb for American Coach Lines, "If men were meant to fly, God would have lowered the fares." Nonetheless, both ads are intended to manipulate prospective customers into buying the products.

## ADVERTISEMENTS POUND HOME SLOGANS AND MEANINGLESS JARGON

How, though, should we categorize the fallacious reasoning that leads people to be swayed by endlessly repeated, mostly empty slogans? *Classic Examples*: "Because You're Worth It" (L'Oréal); "Think Different" (Apple—with the "ly" dropped at Steve Jobs's insistence); "The Ultimate Driving Machine" (BMW); "I'm Lovin' It" (McDonald's).

Slogans run the range from the modestly informative ("Miller Light: Great Taste, Less Filling") to the somewhat suggestive ("Chevrolet. Like a Rock") to the completely irrelevant ("Nike: Just Do It"). In general, they work because they are repeated endlessly, so that they become ingrained in our minds. In the days before television, which is primarily a visual medium, singing commercials did the job on radio. There can be very few people over 70, for example, who could not at the drop of a hat sing the Rinso

soap flakes jingle they heard belted out on radio countless times to these many years ago: "Rinso white, Rinso bright; happy little washday song!"

*The most brilliant propaganda must confine itself to a few points  
and repeat them over and over.*

—ADOLF HITLER

Slogans that tout products as "the official" something or other are an interesting special case. The NFL, for example, has an official soft drink, beer, insurance carrier, wireless carrier, hotel, credit card, shipping service, and pizza. What exactly does all of this mean? In fact, becoming "official" merely means paying for the privilege of being identified with another brand. All of these companies paid through the nose to be the official whatever of the NFL. In 2015 alone, the NFL and its teams brought in \$1.2 billion in sponsorship revenue. Another wrinkle in the "official" gambit is the naming of sports arenas and stadiums after companies that buy this privilege (Coors, Citibank, AT&T, etc.).

## ADS PLAY ON WEAKNESSES AND FEARS

Many ads depend on the consumers' weaknesses or fears for their effectiveness. *Examples*: Ads for deodorants, mouthwashes, hair restorers, hair colorers, and so on. Some of these ads do have the virtue of being informative (Just for Men does darken gray hair), but in many cases the product doesn't do the job advertised (Aquafresh does very little, if anything, for bad breath, since most bad breath originates elsewhere; it does, though, kill some mouth bacteria). In many other cases, the advertised product doesn't do the job any better than competing products (Mylanta isn't any better at counteracting stomach acidity than Maalox, Gelusil, or several other brands; Energizer and Duracell batteries are equally good).

There is nothing wrong with having a product that solves a problem or allays a fear and letting people know about it. But many advertisements create, exaggerate, or exacerbate fears in order to sell just the right thing to save us from the problem we didn't know we had. Consider an ad for the "Guardzilla" (yes, really), a wide-angle in-home video recording system with night vision and motion detection that triggers a siren, alerting you remotely to movement. The ad begins with ominous music and a shadowy figure breaking into a home. "How do you know," the voice-over says, "if your home is secure? How do you know that your family is safe? How do you really know what is going on at your house when you're away?" Scary. So scary and dire is the situation, in fact, that your suburban two-bedroom house needs a security system suitable to Fort Knox.

The beauty-product industry has always been a leader in creating problems to solve for their customers. Who knew before seeing an ad for an eyelash curler that their eyelashes were too straight? Who knew their hands looked too old before seeing antiaging hand cream? Who told us we needed more hair here, less there, none over there, lighter hair, darker hair, thicker hair, thinner hair, or someone else's hair if not the companies that profit from compounding our anxieties about appearance?





Calvin &amp; Hobbes Watterson./Universal Press Syndicate.

## ADS EMPLOY SNEAKY RHETORIC, PHOTOS AND LAYOUTS

In particular, *weasel words* are quite common in advertising. When an ad says the product “*fights* bad breath,” it’s wise to assume it doesn’t *cure* bad breath, because if it did, the ad would make this stronger, less weaseling claim. Similar remarks apply to claims such as “*helps* control dandruff with regular use,” “gets dishes *virtually* spotless,” and so on.

We also need to watch out for sneaky uses of *comparative* and *evaluative* terms, like *good*, *better*, and (best of all) *best*. The term *best* at best translates into “tied for first with all other leading brands.” The “lowest fare to Europe” may turn out to be the standard fare every airline charges. And when an ad says, “No one sells \_\_\_ for less,” you can be pretty sure others sell for the same price. And then there is that wonderful term *free*, itself perfectly unsneaky, but so often used to lure the gullible (all of us in weak moments) into thinking they’re getting something for nothing.

But these kinds of ads aren’t as sneaky as fine print disclaimers that let the manufacturer off the hook. The dietary supplement industry, for example, makes a huge profit hyping health products in ads that don’t exactly say they treat a condition but make claims that lead people to believe they do. Fine print disclaimers do little to dissuade consumers—instead, they provide regulatory loopholes for the manufacturer. For instance, an ad claiming a product is an “amazing new joint health supplement” that is “clinically shown to quickly improve mobility and joint comfort” doesn’t really say it treats arthritis but suggests it does.<sup>1</sup> Then the fine print disclaimer lets the manufacturer off easy when it says in tiny print, “This statement has not been evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration. This product is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure or prevent any disease.” A wary consumer would be wise to check out those “clinical trials,” by the way, to see if they have been published in legitimate scientific journals or are just the marketing ploys of health care hucksters.

<sup>1</sup>From an informative article about diet supplements: “The Bad News About Products, Too Good to Be True.” *Tufts University Health and Nutrition Letter*. September 2009.

Misleading language is just one of the sneak factors in ads. Photos are even more deceptive. Take, for instance, ads for diet pills endorsed by celebrities air-brushed to a size 2, or cruise ads with Photoshopped landscapes. Then there are the food ads that “enhance” products to look believably scrumptious, but are in fact really inedible.<sup>2</sup> In mouthwatering photos of luscious meals, for example, the spaghetti is actually glued to the fork to keep it in place, the ice cubes in frosty drinks are acrylic imitations, and the ice cream smothered in syrup is a slab of lard doused with Karo syrup. More subtle deceptions are the visual cues that tweak our brains into Pavlovian responses when we watch chocolate syrup streaming over caramel candy with the sexy voice-over “Chocolate.” It is safe to say that nothing ever tastes as good as it looks in the ad.

## Deliberate Deception

A Charles Schwab commercial shows a satisfied couple talking about their successful investments with the brokerage firm. Then a three-second statement appears on the screen with about ten lines of print, starting with the information that the people telling their story were real customers of Schwab. But only a speed reader could get to the end fast enough to read the sentence revealing that the customers were paid for their testimonials.

Finally, there is the layout. When does an ad not look like an ad? When it’s laid out like a news article—as it was, for instance, when the *Los Angeles Times* ran a front-page ad for an NBC drama, *Southland*, that was framed as a news report.<sup>3</sup> The only sign of its real intent was an NBC logo with the label “advertisement” in small print. Another issue ran a four-page ad for the movie *The Soloist* laid out in the form of a news article in the entertainment section. A case could be made that the struggling *Times* was desperate for money, given the recent massive cuts to its newsroom, and maybe an occasional lapse is forgivable in marketing something as trivial as entertainment. (Still, 100 reporters signed a letter of protest.) Marketing entertainment as news may not be a serious deception, but framing a sales pitch that way for fraudulent herbal remedies, say, most certainly would be.

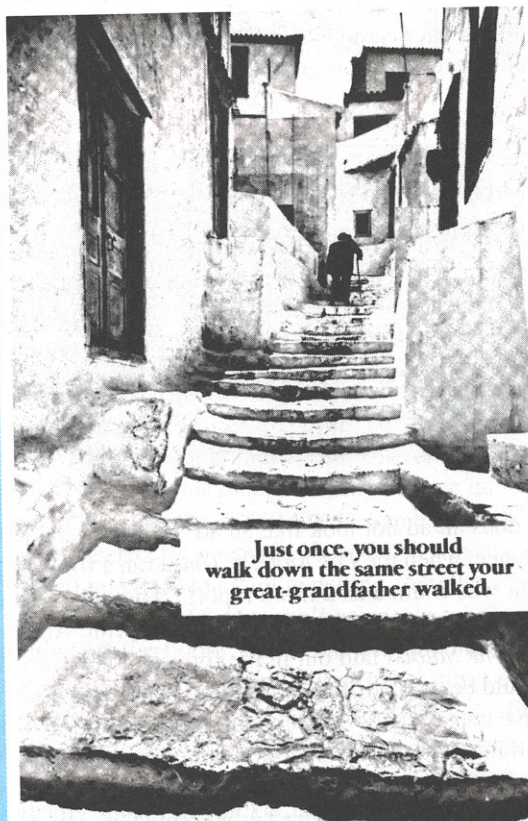
It is often even more difficult to distinguish advertising from original content on popular websites. The *New York Times* features ads that look like *Times* content on its site, though at least it segregates them in a “From Our Advertisers” section. The *Huffington Post*, on the other hand, has advertising right alongside content, distinguishable only via a small “Presented by . . .” note. The line between content and advertisement is even less clear at BuzzFeed, where “Promoted” pieces appear in just the same format as the site’s

<sup>2</sup>Taken from an interesting article on the tricks of the trade in food ads: Segal, David. “Grilled Chicken, That Temperamental Star.” *New York Times*, 9 October 2011.

<sup>3</sup>See: “In Advertisers We Trust.” *Extra!* May 2010.



# All of us come from someplace else.



Picture this if you will.  
A man who's spent all his life in the United States gets on a plane, crosses a great ocean, lands.

He walks the same streets his family walked centuries ago.

He sees his name, which is rare in America, filling three pages in a phone book.

He speaks haltingly the language he wishes he had learned better as a child.

As America's airline to the world, Pan Am does a lot of things.

We help business travelers make meetings on the other side of the world. Our planes take goods to and from six continents. We take vacationers just about anywhere they want to go.

But nothing we do seems to have as much meaning as when we help somebody discover the second heritage that every American has.

**PAN AM**  
America's airline to the world.

See your travel agent.

Source: Pan American World Airways

Advertising tends to concentrate on marginal needs, desires, and fears at the expense of many more important ones. Indeed, a frequently heard charge against advertising is that it increases the already strong tendency of people in industrial countries to become preoccupied with buying and consuming goods. (Note the humorous bumper sticker WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH, THE TOUGH GO SHOPPING.) Occasionally, however, an ad comes along that reminds us of what (for most of us) are much more important values, even though we tend to forget them in the hustle and bustle of everyday life. This Pan Am ad is one of those rare ads that tend to push us in the right direction. Yes! If we can afford it (and more of us could if we spent less on lesser needs), just once, we should walk down the same street our great-grandfather walked. (Pan Am went belly up in the early 1990s, but for other reasons.)

own material. The situation is worse still at sites where the same people who create the original content also write the ads. When even the voice of an author doesn't change between a news item and an ad, there is a significant opportunity for deception.

## ADS DRAW ON TRENDY ISSUES IN THE NEWS

Issues that grip the country are fertile ground for advertisers, who use them to play on our fears and desires. For instance, America's waking up to its own obesity epidemic and the resulting trend of health-conscious eating has created some very strange claims among food companies and chain restaurants. McDonald's, for instance, touts the health benefits of its salads in one ad and then mocks salads in another to advertise its Big Mac.

Sometimes advertisers' fear-mongering around current issues can be absurdly over the top. Take the print ad for the "Patriot Power Generator 1500" (yes, really). It begins with a large banner that reads "Former CIA Official Warns: ISIS Terrorists Could Cripple America's Electric Grid! How will you keep your family safe when the power goes out? And it Will go out."

Advertisers also pounce on changing social norms, but rarely have the courage to drive such changes. A number of brands got some free press by being among the first to feature gay and lesbian couples in roles usually reserved for straight couples. But except in rare instances and in very specific markets, this didn't happen until social attitudes toward gay rights had already radically changed.

## ADS WHITEWASH CORPORATE IMAGERY

Whenever an ad sells a company's image instead of a product, you have to wonder what is going on. With the popularity of environmental issues on the rise, corporations that have a major impact on the environment have sponsored an increasing number of "green" ads. DuPont's classic "seal-slapping" ad captures the flavor of these eco-friendly spots. This one features a scenic shoreline with dolphins diving, penguins waddling, sea lions clapping (you get the idea)—all to the melodic strains of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy." Just visible on the horizon is an oil tanker. The voice-over tells us, "recently DuPont announced that its energy unit would pioneer the use of new double-hulled tankers in order to safeguard the environment." Not long after the ad appeared—with its happy sea creatures cavorting in an eco-friendly environment—the EPA issued a report that DuPont was far and away the largest emitter of toxic waste.

Sometimes advertising is *just* about corporate image rather than incitement to buy anything. Do you ever wonder why a company like Archer Daniels Midland (ADM) spends money on national advertising? ADM, primarily an agricultural processing company, sells very few products directly to consumers—and those products are generally not mentioned at all in their ads. So why advertise? Well, one reason is that they can—ADM's annual revenues are often in excess of \$80 billion. The other reason is that ADM is seemingly always in one PR crisis or another, be it scandals involving price fixing, antitrust violations, or a whole slew of environmental problems. Some of this may be inevitable given ADM's size and reach, but that is just the image they want to escape. Their advertisements portray them as a caring partner to small farmers, a real backbone



of rural America and champion of its values. In one recent campaign, ADM named itself “the biggest little company out there.” As a mainstay of the Fortune 500 (usually in the top 30–40) list of America’s largest companies, it’s probably safe to just call them a big company.

### ADS USE AND PROMOTE STEREOTYPES

There’s a kind of mystery surrounding the way toys are advertised to children. Some toys are marketed only to boys and some only to girls. Why in the world would an advertiser want to ignore half of its potential buying (or at least, demanding) population? If you were a maker of toy trucks, wouldn’t you want to sell those trucks to as many parents as you could, those buying for girls as well as for boys? If you made dollhouses, wouldn’t you want the money of boys’ parents just as much as the money of girls’ parents?

The answer is that advertisers know there is more money to be made trading on the stereotypical expectations of parents and children. But of course, the advertisements themselves do as much as anything else to encourage and perpetuate those stereotypes. And this is not a good thing. Judith Elaine Blakemore, a professor of psychology and expert in the development of gender roles, speaking about her research to the National Association for the Education of Young Children, said: “We found that girls’ toys were associated with physical attractiveness, nurturing, and domestic skill, whereas boys’ toys were rated as violent, competitive, exciting, and somewhat dangerous. The toys rated as most likely to be educational and to develop children’s physical, cognitive, artistic, and other skills were typically categorized as neutral or moderately masculine. We concluded that strongly gender-typed toys appear to be less supportive of optimal development than neutral or moderately gender-typed toys.” and that “[i]f you want to develop children’s physical, cognitive, academic, musical, and artistic skills, toys that are not strongly gender-typed are more likely to do this.”<sup>4</sup> Parents have to go out of their way to insist on this, though, as most marketing to children is still very gendered.

We find similar patterns in advertising to adults. How often do you see household cleaning products advertised using male actors? How often are women behind the wheel in pickup truck advertisements? Racially targeted advertising may be less common today than it used to be. But it is still illuminating to have a look at different ads for the same product in various markets where advertisers expect different demographics.

### UBIQUITOUS ADS AND SENSORY OVERLOAD

Marketers are nothing if not resourceful. What with conventional reading material and TV watching on the wane, they can no longer count on reaching consumers through established media like magazines, newspapers, and TV. Instead they are taking a

<sup>4</sup>Blakemore, Judith Elaine. “What the Research Says: Gender-Typed Toys.” Web. <http://www.naeyc.org>.

scattershot approach, plastering ads all over the place.<sup>5</sup> Microsoft advertised on tray tables on board US Airways planes; Geico on subway turnstiles; Continental Airlines on Chinese food cartons and pizza boxes; Perry Ellis on shirt boxes and hanging bags at dry cleaners. And how about this for a mini-marketing gem: CBS was stamping the names of CBS television shows on supermarket eggs. Then there are the video screens that have appeared in taxicabs and elevators, ostensibly to provide news but heavily larded with ads. Ads are even projected on the sides of buildings, and old-fashioned billboards are being converted into digital screens that change messages throughout the day.

Even ostensibly “commercial free” media often isn’t. Popular movies and Internet-only programs have the same for-a-price product placements that we’ve come to expect on network television. Netflix’s *The Ranch*, for instance, quickly starts to feel like a Budweiser ad with a laugh track. And recent James Bond movies often seem like action-packed catalogs for all sorts of products.

Given the intense marketing barrage with which we live, we cannot possibly process all of the ads to which we’re exposed on a daily basis. Most of them pass us by without grabbing our attention, at least consciously. Advertisers, then, have to go further and further to inundate the street, the Internet, and the airwaves with their images and slogans in the hopes of capturing our collective attention, or at least saturating our subconscious with their messages.

### PUFFERY IS LEGAL, BUT NOT DECEPTIVE ADVERTISING

Finally, it’s worth noting that what is called “puffery”—generalized, vague, or exaggerated claims, particularly when asserted humorously—is legal. *Example:* The claim by BMW to be “The Ultimate Driving Machine.” (Litigation does very occasionally arise concerning borderline cases.) However, ads can overstep legal boundaries and make fraudulent claims. The cigarette industry, in particular, has come under fire for deceptive advertising. For example, in spring 2003, Philip Morris was found guilty of consumer fraud in its ads for “light” cigarettes. Judge Nicholas Byron ruled that the company intentionally misled the public into thinking that Marlboro Lights and Cambridge Lights were “less harmful or safer than their regular counterparts” and ordered the company to pay \$10.8 billion to the plaintiffs. This is one of several lawsuits brought against cigarette companies in recent years.

It may be, though, that current restrictions on deceptive advertising and marketing are less than sufficient. In 2014, the Supreme Court allowed a suit brought by Pom Wonderful (a seller of pomegranate juice) against Coca-Cola for false advertising to move forward. It seems Minute Maid (owned by Coke) sold a brand labeled “Pomegranate Blueberry” that prominently featured pomegranates and blueberries in the label artwork. The problem was that the juice consisted of only 0.3 percent pomegranate juice and 0.2 percent blueberry juice; 99.4 percent of the juice came from much less expensive apples and grapes. However, in 2016, a jury found in favor of Coke—probably because

<sup>5</sup>Examples taken from: “Anywhere the Eye Can See, It’s Now Likely to See an Ad.” *New York Times*, 15 January 2007.



Coke was technically in compliance with FDA labeling requirements. Perhaps it is time to revisit those requirements?

## ADVERTISING TO CHILDREN

Targeting children has become a tricky business for advertisers. Consumer advocates have become more vocal about the evils of marketing to kids, and regulators have pressured various industries to soft-pedal their ads.<sup>6</sup> Given the rise in childhood obesity, food marketers, in particular, have come under fire, with the result that some companies, like Coca-Cola and Hershey, have actually agreed not to advertise to children. But advertisers are nothing if not creative, and though they proceed with caution, they have developed strategies to bypass regulations with ads that don't look like ads at all. Instead, they are framed as games or contests or events that "engage with" kids rather than sell directly to them. So you have magazines like *Sports Illustrated Kids* inventing such programs as "Sports Dad of the Year," sponsored by Wendy's, or design-your-own games for Goldfish, the Pepperidge Farm cracker. This subtle sell may seem innocuous, but not to those opposed to commercials for kids, who worry that children are brainwashed into identifying with the brand. Of course publishers in favor of ads for kids (for obvious reasons) dismiss these concerns with the argument that children have to get used to the commercial world they live in—and the earlier, the better. Really? Tell that to a mother in the supermarket who is battling her kid for the box of Cocoa Puffs he just yanked off the shelf.

## 4. The Upside of Ads

Although most ads hawk consumer goods, a few actually attempt to educate us or warn us against harmful activities. Partnership for a Drug-Free America has aired a series of ads aimed at combating drug use in this country. The ads, targeting young people as well as parents, focus on the harmful effects of drugs ranging from Ecstasy to marijuana to alcohol. For example, one set of TV spots focuses on embarrassing or disturbing moments that teen drug users experience as a result of their habit. One ad shows a girl trying to conceal a drug-induced nosebleed that starts suddenly in class. Another features a boy inadvertently dropping a drug packet on the counter of a fast-food restaurant. A more shocking series of ads appeals to the vanity of teens by running photographs of young adults who are long-term users in fashionable but grotesque poses that highlight the disfiguring effects of methamphetamines. For instance, under the caption "Body by Crystal Meth," a young man stands, hand on hips, revealing a skeletal body ravaged by drugs. Ads aimed at parents urge them to monitor their kids' activities and social life. They feature parents asking questions like "Where are you going after school?" or "What are your plans after soccer?" Companion ads show older, grateful teens who realize in hindsight that all those irritating questions their parents asked managed to deter

<sup>6</sup>Clifford, Stephanie. "A Fine Line When Ads and Children Mix." *New York Times*, 15 February 2010.

them from using drugs. Clearly the message is that parents should be involved in their kids' lives by asking questions and by knowing what they do, whom they hang out with, and where they go. We can only hope that all the advertising devices and gimmicks used so effectively to market goods and services will be just as successful at discouraging drug use among teens.

Public service announcements crafted like ads are another strategy used to publicize wrongdoings and bring about change. As part of an effort to ferret out insider trading on Wall Street, the FBI ran a one-minute video featuring Michael Douglas, well known for playing the criminal financier Gordon Gekko—whose mantra was "greed is good"—in the film *Wall Street*. In the video, Douglas drives home the message that insider trading is illegal. "The movie was fiction, but the problem is real," he says. By using a megawatt celebrity like Douglas, the FBI hoped to bring the crime to the attention of the public and encourage whistle-blowers to report illegal activity in the financial world.

### All that Glitters . . .

*Luxury used to be for the happy few, but now it is hawked to the mass of consumers. Even ordinary products are hyped with inflated language to give them luxury status. James B. Twitchell comments on this trend in "Luxe Populi," San Francisco Chronicle, May 20, 2007.*

*... [T]he consumers of the new luxury have a sense of entitlement that transcends social class, a conviction that the finest things are their birth-right. Never mind that they may have been born into a family whose ancestral estate is a tract house in the suburbs, near the mall, not paid for, and whose family crest was downloaded from the Internet. Ditto the signet ring design. Language reflects this hijacking. Words such as gourmet, premium, boutique, chic, accessory and classic have loosened from their elite moorings and now describe such top-of-category items as popcorn, hamburgers, discount brokers, shampoo, scarves, ice cream and trailer parks.*

## 5. Targeted Advertising and Big Data

Not long ago, which ads you saw depended entirely on where you were or what media you sought out. You saw the same ads as anyone else who went to those places or engaged with that media. Today, a great number of the ads you see are targeted much more specifically to you—or, to be more exact, to the marketing profiles established by your past behavior.